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Omar Khayyám

Some verses and an introduction



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By W.E.B. Whittaker and Rex Löwenberg.

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Introduction

Omar Khayyám

It is now a matter of no little difficulty to write an introduction to the Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám. To each separate edition has been prefixed an introduction telling, in various ways, the same facts concerning his life and works. Every conceivable theological point has been discussed with more or less amplitude. Condemnations and appreciations have come forth by the score; and no new light is shed either on the dim outline of his life or the philosophic value of his work. And it is hopeless for one not thoroughly steeped in Eastern imagery, history and tradition, to do more than give briefly the sum of his own opinions in regard to the said verses. It is therefore not the intention of the present writers to do more than that.

The few events in Omar's life have become familiar to such of the public as are attracted by the subtle versification of the Master of Moods through the essay prefixed by Mr. FitzGerald to his edition of the Rubaiyat. It is a matter of doubt whether Omar's life can have been eventful to any extent. He was more famous for the thoughts he had not expressed on paper than for those he had, despite the lingering and wistful haunting beauty of the latter. He had no ambition as it is now understood, neither did he care to move the world through the medium of politics. His joy was peace.

The religious aspect of Omar's works is the most important factor in moralists' judgements of the value of his verse. They read into it what is not there, and fail to see what is there. They see the selfishness, the cynicism, the contempt, and the licentious strain, and pass over the sorrow, the warm-hearted friendship, the unforgetting memory, the resignation and the aesthetic beauty of the life. Omar was the Prince of Hedonists. Pleasure was his religion and his life, his work and his play. His creed was simple and beautiful. To speak of the Pursuit of pleasure without a qualifying sense of disapproval is, in this modern England, a serious offence to many who still adhere to a puritanically hypocritical view of what they are pleased to call life. Yet surely the pursuit of pleasure is not without its virtues. When a hedonist sees poverty it naturally jars on his refined artistic sense; and if he be true to his creed, he will endeavour to remove such signs of misery. The beautifying of life is to him a sacred duty, self-imposed, and with its own reward. Each little act of the common day carries with it an artistic sense of grace. Convention is regarded only so far as it conveys an aesthetic value in its rules, and is cast aside when it hampers and destroys the beauty of living. Hedonism is what people name the simple life. In it there is no discordant note and no pain. Here and there comes an act or a thought which appears superficially to be a breach of its smooth comeliness, but which is really a purposeful effort to break, by a vivid contrast, what might otherwise degenerate into a cloying over-sweet monotony. Omar lived the simple life. His creed was simple.

Here is the creed of Omar: I believe
In wine and roses, also I believe
In woman (what a foolish thing to do!)
And in the God that made them I believe.

(Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám, by Richard le Gallienne.)

Wine to softly fill his mind with magic scenes of beauty, pictures of roseate futures and hidden possibilities where no sorrow would be, and pain would only exist as a foil to increase the ecstatic sensations of joy. Woman to soothe him in his sorrows, to recreate them, and to smooth care away again. Girls were his handmaidens and his queens, his pleasure and hate—all things to all moods. A fair oval face, with great round soft eyes and pleading lips, hovered in his mind at all times and dictated his every action. God he thought of as one all kindness, who would never "in fit of after rage destroy" even the faulty vessel he had condemned to a brief existence on His earth. In no place can one discover even a faint trace of doubt as to the final forgiveness of the Lord of All. To Omar God was what he is not to the great majority—a friend to be trusted in silence and to be left free from vain and querulous importunings.

His greatest charm was at the same time his greatest fault. His power was confined to the delicate definition of certain moods of youth. If life were a series of moods then Omar had mastered the secret of life, but moods are rather the interludes in a life than its foundation. To introspective youth sorrow is the subtlest form of pleasure though they know it not. Youth finds at times a curious joy in sad reveries of past days, of faded flowers and lost kisses, and in musing glimpses of a future with its promise of fame and pleasure blended with a certain selfconscious self-sacrifice. One is so ready to look forward to a career of sorrow when one is young. It seems so noble, so poetical, so unusual. But age brings with it disillusion and the painful discovery that the World is not impressed by a conscious affectation of sadness and romantic melancholy. The World merely looks and passes on with the words "It will pass away. He is young yet." And when one is old and consequently wise and virtuous, one thinks and says the same. Omar, on the contrary, was a young man all his life. Through all his days he gazed and smiled on the ways of the world without change. About conventional religion he was gently satirical, about ambition rather dubious, and about fame he was careless. Women and wine he considered as means to an end. His prevailing thought was of the mutability of human life. He could not drink without thinking that the cup would soon be empty. He could not be happy with a friend because of the inevitable parting.

There is no day without its faded flower,
Nor any joy without its closing hour;
This Cup of Wine which joyfully you raise
Itself will emptied be for all your power.

It is said that when Omar was young he for many days suffered torments of doubt about his future. He had great friends who would have helped him if his ambition lead in the direction of politics. He had others who would aid him as a merchant. Should he sacrifice his ideals as a poet and the dim possibility of eternal fame and accept the certainty of worldly wealth and position? He knew not and there was none to help him. At sunset on a hot summer's day, Omar lay on the flower-strewn banks of a softly flowing river. Through the sultry hours of the day he had lain and thought of the future, and now overcome by the weariness of prolonged mental debate, he fell asleep. And he dreamed of a fair green country, and the sound of soft music filled his ears. Before him were gates of gold and ivory, which fell open as he watched. From their portals came a young girl robed in white, with a girdle of precious stones. Her glorious hair, dark as the Caverns of the Night, flowed freely and gracefully over the lithe beauty of her body. A crown of crimson roses was on her head, and a garland of roses fell from her shoulders. In either hand she held a pomegranate. Swiftly she came to him and gazed on him sadly, with a gentle look in her great eyes. After a space she said: -

"Omar, the Tent maker, I am sent to thee to bid thee make thy choice. I bear in my hands two pomegranates, the one ripe and full of Joy, the other green and as yet sour. The first, over-rich, will the sooner die and leave no seed, the second will mature slowly and spread seed on the face of the earth. The first is called Wealth, and the second Poetry. Choose."

And he chose the unripe fruit. The maiden knelt and kissed him, and he awoke to find a rose leaf fluttering from his lips. But that dream decided the course of his life. Henceforth without fail he would desert the world and find pleasure at the riverside with flowers and girls. And so for the remainder of his earthly existence he lived at Naishápúr, with "a flask of wine, a book of verse," and his little Moon.

His schoolfellows rose to rank and power and did not forget him, yet from them he took nothing. His fame as a teacher spread into many lands, yet it did not influence the smooth passage of his life. Day after day his magic thought added ruby after ruby to his Book of Verse, and hour after hour his lot became fairer. Yet at times, even with Omar, Pleasure palled and Life became empty. On such a day he said to a disciple, "Many times as the sun rises on a new day I long for a poison so subtle that I might pass over into the Garden of Dreams in a peaceful sleep. Without pain and without sorrow, without regret and without envy. With a hope of endless sleep among the lilies and roses of that mystic World of Dreams. And then if in Life I failed to attain, in Death I should achieve my heart's desire. What are Happiness and Love, Beauty and Wealth, Health and Hope? Dreams, dreams, dreams, and I myself am a Spirit Unreal in a World of Unreality." But such moods were only momentary. They departed with a cup of wine or a smile from some loved one.

Years before his death he had hoped that his body might lie in a pleasant place, with roses growing wild over his tomb.

Ah, with the grape my fading life provide,
And wash my body whence the life has died,
And in a winding-sheet of vine-leaf wrapt,
So bury me by some sweet garden-side.

That ev'n my buried ashes such a snare
Of perfume shall fling up into the air,
As not a true believer passing by
But shall be overtaken unaware.

(FitzGerald)

He died at Naishápúr, in A.D. 1123, and still the wild roses bloom over his lonely grave. The flowers sustained by the ashes of his mortal body still hold the attention of the passer-by, while the immortal flowers of his imagination hold, and will ever hold, the world in thrall.

The authors have endeavoured, as far as possible, to reproduce in the English metre, made popular by the genius of Mr. FitzGerald, such quatrains of the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyám as have not previously been rendered in English verse. They have no knowledge of Persian, and are therefore unhampered by any pedantic restriction of the freedom of translation. They have endeavoured to convey the spirit of his work, if not always the form. There is no strict sequence in the arrangement of the quatrains, Omar's moods succeeding one to the other with the breathless rapidity of changing thoughts in the mind of a girl.

Quatrains

I

The waking sun has touched the sky with gold
And Dawn her wondrous vision has unrolled—
Ah! haste to drink, while yet thou hast the Time
Before that last long Night doth thee enfold.

II

To you who now with faces sore downcast,
Wander awhile where Merchants barter fast,
A girl will bring with footsteps soft and swift
A Future fair with Flower and Maid at last.

III

Of all Earth's secrets I have learned but one
That sorrow never dies when sets the sun.
Yea this is all the Wisdom I have found
And soon my Days of Learning will be done.

IV

Why should our lives be now so much perplext
With thinking of this World and of the Next,
Life's little Tale will far too soon be told,
That we should weary it with vain pretext.

V

For not a Star that burneth now on High
Shall cease to glitter when we two shall die;
The sun its never ending course will keep
And still the Moon will brighten in the sky.

VI

Ah! Heart, my Heart, the day draws near to night,
And soon thou shalt be taken from my sight.
O sorry Fate that we so soon must part,
And I must stay and mourn my lost Delight.

VII

What if the Sufi's ceaseless prate be true?
What if a God some day shall judge us two?
But why should I my idle brain perplex
Beloved, have I not both Wine and You?

VIII

Then fill the Cup before the dying Day
Shall take my sorrows and my joys away,
And hope that when my years have ceased to be,
Some potter may make wine cups from my Clay.

IX

Drunken am I, yet quickly tell me, friend,
Did God Himself a Message to you send?
Did He Himself point out to you the Way
On which my wandering footsteps I should bend?

X

With strange features has my Life been made,
And through strange Evils has its Path been laid;
Yet how may I be better than I am,
For as God made me I have ever stayed.

XI

All broken lie those Promises of mine,
Long since forgotten in the lovely Vine:
Well, let them go; 't were better far I broke
An hundred Promises than one fair jar of Wine.

XII

Sages have sifted all this World of Dust,
And found that naught is certain, save—the Dust,
But here are faces fair, and rosy wine
Why vex your mind with thinking of—the Dust.

XIII

Why ceaseless argue of the Five and Four,
What matter if there be Ten Thousand more,
Will One be easier then to understand?
Ah! leave these Dreams, and seek the tavern Door.

XIV

Within the Cup there is such magic grace
That drinking I may see my loved one's face,
And so my many sorrows I may lose,
And in my dreaming find some short solace.

XV

I drink of wine, and yet I do no sin;
Happy am I when once the Room within.
And if you ask me why I worship Wine
Is not thine own self-worship greater sin?

XVI

For when my soul I drench with Ruby Wine,
Before my eyes there comes a dream divine,
Within mine ears sweet music ever plays;
Shall I leave these for that sad world of thine?

XVII

The Nightingale is singing on the tree,
The roses send a breath of joy to me.
Leave those sad shadows of the idle Past,
And take the joy of what we still may see!

XVIII

Close to the River blooms a Garden fair,
What sweeter Heaven may I find than there?
What happier hours than those that I now spend
Watching the sunlight rippling on thy hair?

XIX

Why shouldst thou vanish with the closing day,
Canst thou not spare a little time to stay?
For lo! The Angel hovers overhead,
And soon shall come to take us twain away.

XX

As I am now this Pitcher once has been,
Who knows what splendid Lovers It has seen
Perchance the very Handle that I hold
Has clasped the Throat of some forgotten Queen.

XXI

Then take the cup, and so let all thy fears
Be drowned in It, and mingled with thy tears.
Who knows, this Clay that now is Me,
May build a Tavern Wall in after years.

XXII

Ah! Heart, my Heart, how splendid falls the night
Within her Mantle holding strange Delight,
Let naught of Earth this silent hour come nigh,
Let naught save Wine be brought into my sight.

XXIII

Silver and Gold and Ivory they bring,
Praises of God and future joy they sing,
Yet while with me I have both Wine and You,
Their bribes will I upon the desert fling.

XXIV

Life to my lips once held a cup of Wine,
And deep I drank, deeming it Drink divine,
But yet the taste was bitter in my mouth,
For it was Grief, no Daughter of the Vine.

XXV

You tell me, friend, my face from Wine to turn
Lest afterwards in hell fire I shall burn
What if 'tis true, does not this moment glad,
Outweigh a future fate which none may learn?

XXVI

If all the world shall burn with sudden fire,
Yet I will fearlessly of Thee enquire,
Why Thou shouldst have ever made this Me,
If It must perish at Thy least Desire.

XXVII

Man with a strong Desire Thou hast endowed,
And yet to fill It Thou hast not allowed;
And so we halt between Desire and Doubt,
Fearing to Drink, nor yet to Faith avowed.

XXVIII

Full often when the Stars shine overhead,
I lie unsleeping on my restless bed,
And think upon the cruelty of Him
Who sets with sins the Path whereon we tread.

XXIX

For every breath a Sense of Sorrow brings,
'Tis in the Music that the Bulbul sings,
'Tis in the Flowers that lie beneath my feet,
And even in the Palaces of Kings.

XXX

I put my lips to yon fair vessel's brink
And found that 'twas but Sorrow's bitter Drink;
So took I one long draught of this red wine
That straightway to Oblivion I might sink.

XXXI

If in the Town thou dost achieve to Fame,
Men think thee sinner, and revile thy name,
And if within thy corner thou dost sit,
Men say then that thou plottest some new Shame.

XXXII

Better thy hand with some girl's hair should play
Than vex thy brain with Visions of the Way,
Better for thee to drink the Vine's Red Blood,
For Death shall pour thee his dark Wine some day.

XXXIII

Why reason if the Tale be False or True?
The Years that are to come are all too few
And when they pass, and I to Dust return,
What matters it if Earth be Old or New?

XXXIV

Life's little Song we know will soon be done
What if the end before this Moon be run?
Ah! seize the pleasure while you yet have time,
For naught save Sorrow comes when sets the sun.

XXXV

There is no Day without its faded flower,
Nor any joy without its dying hour.
This Cup of Wine which joyfully you raise,
Itself will emptied be for all your power.

XXXVI

Seeing this World is neither Thine or Mine,
How foolish I should be to drink no Wine;
What pity not to see my own Heart's Love,
Nor yet my fingers in her hair entwine.

XXXVII

O! thou who weepest now for Sorrow's pain,
Raise up thine head and give one thought again,
For save through Sorrow thou shalt have no joy,
And but through Sorrow Life can yield no gain.

XXXVIII

Drink not with all men that by chance you meet,
Drink in the Tavern, but be silent in the street,
And if a Wise Man Poison brings to thee,
Take it and drink, and drinking, find it sweet.

XXXIX

Why sorrow with the griefs and pains of Men,
And toiling seek for God or Heaven, for when
The Wrapper of thy Soul to Rags is torn,
What matter to thee all thy past sins then?

XL

The soft spring wind has made the roses flower,
The Bul-bul sings the joy of every hour,
Then rest beneath the palm trees' pleasant shade,
And watch the Red Rose spread her Golden Dower.

XLI

Some see in Life naught else save Pain and Tears,
Repeating Sorrows and strange changing Fears -
Come then with me, and I will show you how
To live in Joy till end the weary years.

XLII

Queen of my Life, the Golden Sun is setting,
The Day is done; but there is no forgetting.
Night and her Stars in silver splendour come,
I have thy love; but there is no forgetting.

XLIII

The fresh-born roses bring a breath of Spring,
The evening winds a breath of Pleasure bring,
And all the birds that round us quickly fly,
Bear Gladness in the throbbing notes they sing.

XLIV

Some men for ever think this Life a Dream,
And Death the Great Awakening they deem -
And when in joy I laugh and love and sing,
These subtle thinkers tell me I blaspheme.

XLV

O Dreamer, dream and think of faces fair!
O Drinker drain a cup to faces fair!
There is so very little time for aught,
Save subtle thought of transient faces fair.

XLVI

If e'er I drank of Joy, and lightly laughed,
Straightway did Sorrow bring her bitter Draught;
If ever I dipped Bread in Salt, and ate,
It tore my heart as wounds a dagger's shaft.

XLVII

I hold no Rose, and yet I have the Thorn,
I have no Light, yet still the fierce flames burn,
I have no hope, of Heaven or Afterwards,
So still my thoughts unto the Cup I turn.

XLVIII

My Sins are not enough to merit Hell,
And certainly in Heaven I shall not dwell,
Then where Hereafter shall I go to, say,
Is there not one of you Wise Men can tell?

XLIX

Hast thou not seen a potter with his clay
Making his jars and cups from day to day?
Yet if perchance he shape one all awry,
Is it not straightway spurned and cast away?

L

Golden as Sunlight is thy splendid hair,
Slender as Cypress is thy body fair,
And face more lovely than the waking Rose,
With you beside me for nought else I care.

LI

Around my feet is spread a Field of Flowers,
Showing my Heart a vision of glad hours,
When Roses cast their blossoms all around,
What use to me those visionary Powers?

LII

So while Life is, let all your days be glad,
'Tis only Súfís who are ever sad,
Drink, laugh, and sing, and let the Grey World go,
What matter if those Dreamers think us mad?

LIII

Far through the Mists I hear dead voices calling,
Shades of the long past years of love's enthralling.
They bid me come, and coming sleep in peace;
I come! I come! The Veil of Night is falling.

